

VZCZCXRO5979  
PP RUEHFK RUEHKSO RUEHNAG RUEHNH  
DE RUEHKO #7000/01 3490807  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 150807Z DEC 06  
FM AMEMBASSY TOKYO  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9122  
INFO RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEHAAA/THE WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RUEAWJA/USDOJ WASHDC PRIORITY  
RULSDMK/USDOT WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUCPDOG/USDOC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC//J5//  
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RHHMHBA/COMPACFLT PEARL HARBOR HI  
RHMFIUU/HQ PACAF HICKAM AFB HI//CC/PA//  
RHMFIUU/COMUSJAPAN YOKOTA AB JA//J5/JO21//  
RUYNAAAC/COMNAVFORJAPAN YOKOSUKA JA  
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2768

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 TOKYO 007000

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DEPT FOR E, P, EB, EAP/J, EAP/P, EAP/PD, PA  
WHITE HOUSE/NSC/NEC; JUSTICE FOR STU CHEMTOB IN ANTI-TRUST DIVISION;  
TREASURY/OASIA/IMI/JAPAN; DEPT PASS USTR/PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE;  
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FAS/ITP FOR SCHROETER; PACOM HONOLULU FOR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY ADVISOR;  
CINCPAC FLT/PA/ COMNAVFORJAPAN/PA.

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [OIIP](#) [KMDR](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [ECON](#) [ELAB](#) [JA](#)  
SUBJECT: DAILY SUMMARY OF JAPANESE PRESS 12/15/06

INDEX:

- (1) Abe popularity spins down; Visible leadership a key to rebounding
- (2) Minshuto fighting futile final battle in extra Diet session; United front slogan in tatters, no-confidence motion uncertain
- (3) Editorial: DPJ platform unconvincing
- (4) Deputy Foreign Minister Nishida informally appointed to ambassadorship; Yabunaka likely to be successor to Nishida
- (5) Cooperation between Japan, NATO; Unknown benefits; US, EU have high hopes

ARTICLES:

- (1) Abe popularity spins down; Visible leadership a key to rebounding

TOKYO (Page 2) (Full)  
December 14, 2006

The rate of public support for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his cabinet has slumped. The Abe cabinet's approval rating made a fairly good showing with 65% right after its inauguration in late September. About two months later, however, it fell below 50%. It still cannot be said to be low. However, it will likely enter a cautionary zone if its downward trend continues. We tried to forecast the Abe cabinet's future course while analyzing approval

ratings for the cabinet of Abe's predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi, who sustained his high popularity for about five and a half years.

Koizumi made his debut as prime minister in April 2001. The approval rating for the Koizumi cabinet hit an all-time high of 86.3% upon its inauguration and was sustained at around 80% throughout that year. This is contrasting with Prime Minister Abe, whose popularity slipped soon. When it comes to freshness, Koizumi was a cut above Abe.

In February 2002, a surprising incident happened to the Koizumi cabinet's support rate. It was when Koizumi sacked Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka. The Koizumi cabinet's popularity rating went down to 58.0%. In June that year, the Defense Agency was found to have made a list of those who requested information disclosure. At the time, the Koizumi cabinet's support rate further dropped to 42.9%.

It was generally believed until the Koizumi cabinet's debut that the cabinet support rate would not go up once it goes down. However, Koizumi was persevering. The line graph of approval ratings for his cabinet zigzagged with sliding and rebounding. In 2006, his cabinet's support rate leveled off at around 50%.

There was a trend when the Koizumi cabinet rebounded in public support. The Koizumi cabinet's support rate went up in September 2002 when Koizumi made a sudden visit to North Korea, in September 2003 when he picked Abe for his ruling party's secretary general post, and in August 2005 when he dissolved the House of Representatives for postal privatization. As is evident from this fact, the Koizumi cabinet's support rate rose unexceptionally when he made a big decision to make the news.

TOKYO 00007000 002 OF 005

Koizumi's decisions were all controversial with pros and cons. However, Koizumi made easy-to-understand decisions in the face of objections. This is why he won public support.

In other words, the public wants the prime minister's visible leadership.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Abe, concurrently the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's president, stayed away from his ruling party's reinstatement of "postal rebels" last month. Abe left the matter to his party's leadership, so his face was invisible. Earlier this month, the government and ruling coalition agreed to review road-related tax revenues, which have been exclusively set aside for road construction. The agreement paved the way to transform road-linked tax revenues into general-purpose revenues. However, Abe appeared to have caved in to pressure from the LDP's road lobby. Nothing was clear.

Yoshiaki Kobayashi, a professor of political science at the law faculty of Keio University, notes three points about the Abe cabinet: 1) the public can't see whether the Abe cabinet will take over the Koizumi reforms or whether it will change course; 2) the Abe cabinet is tackling educational reform, North Korea, and other issues that will not show results soon; and 2) Koizumi always narrowed down various issues to a single issue, but the Abe is addressing too many issues.

It would be indispensable for the prime minister to show the future course of his government and display his leadership in a clear-cut way so as to regain his popularity. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki said, "The prime minister's decisions under his leadership are not well known to the public, and we also must think it over."

(2) Minshuto fighting futile final battle in extra Diet session;  
United front slogan in tatters, no-confidence motion uncertain

SANKEI (Page 5) (Abridged slightly)  
December 15, 2006

The ongoing extraordinary Diet session, which is about to end, has been marked by futile attempts to turn the tables by the major opposition Minshuto (Democratic Party of Japan) under the slogan of

a united front with other opposition parties. The party decided last night to submit a no-confidence motion against the Abe cabinet. But the party leadership's response had considerably wavered before reaching that point, exposing differences in views with other opposition parties. Although Minshuto eyes joining hands with other opposition parties in the Upper House election next summer, a warning light has now turned on for that strategy, as well.

Yesterday when the last question-and-answer session was going on at an Upper House committee on a bill to revise the Basic Education Law, Secretary General Yukio Hatoyama ran in the Upper House Minshuto waiting room to ask for the chamber's cooperation. But a senior Upper House member bluntly told him not to count on the upper chamber. Although opposition party members stormed the committee chairman in taking a vote, the session was not thrown into turmoil.

Minshuto's response wavered significantly toward the end of the current Diet session. A meeting on Dec. 12 of the secretaries general of Minshuto, the Social Democratic Party, and the People's New Party reached an agreement to submit a no-confidence motion against Foreign Minister Taro Aso. The meeting also studied the

TOKYO 00007000 003 OF 005

option of filing a no-confidence motion against the Abe cabinet.

But Minshuto Diet Affairs Committee Chairman Yoshiaki Takagi was reluctant to do so, saying that a rejection of the motion would be taken as the Abe cabinet winning public confidence. In a press conference yesterday, Acting President Naoto Kan highlighted the need to show a resolute stance. But when it came to the party's response to Diet affairs, he said from the sidelines, "I don't know specifics because I'm not in charge of all those things."

President Ichiro Ozawa, who has also completely shifted weight to the selection of candidates for the Upper House election, repeatedly indicated that Diet business has been left entirely to the secretary general. But finally yesterday, Ozawa told Hatoyama, "We need to consider submitting a no-confidence motion against the Abe cabinet."

Minshuto's elusive attitude has nurtured discontent among other opposition parties.

PNP Secretary General Hisaoki Kamei hastily held a press conference yesterday to announce his party's plan to submit a no-confidence motion against the cabinet without waiting for Minshuto's decision. The Japanese Communist Party and the SDP also supported the PNP's plan. Although Minshuto eventually decided to go along with their plan, opposition parties' slogan of forming a united front in the ending extra Diet session has effectively collapsed. "Measures for the Diet and elections are closely associated with each other. We must watch the situation carefully," Kamei said at the press meeting. It was a warning to Minshuto, which eyes joining hands with other opposition parties in the upcoming Upper House election.

(3) Editorial: DPJ platform unconvincing

NIHON KEIZAI (Page 2) (Abridged)  
December 15, 2006

The leading opposition Democratic Party of Japan (Minshuto) has outlined its platform as a foundation of its manifesto for next summer's election for the House of Councillors. It fleshed out basic policies that DPJ President Ichiro Ozawa announced when he stood for the party's presidential election in September. However, the platform is ambiguous in many respects and unconvincing.

In the area of national security, for example, the DPJ focused its security stance on whether to allow collective self-defense. The DPJ, in its platform, is going to allow the right of self-defense "if and when Japan sustains an incursion that directly threatens Japan's peace and security, without getting caught up in conceptual arguments over the rights of individual self-defense and collective self-defense". However, conservative lawmakers in the DPJ are opposed to this wording.

Within the DPJ, there are arguments for and against collective self-defense. The platform therefore had to use such equivocal wording. In the event of an "incursion" or more precisely, in the event of an armed attack, Japan would normally have to exercise its right of individual self-defense to cope with such an eventuality. The DPJ must account for what case is anticipated for collective self-defense, or its debates will not deepen.

(4) Deputy Foreign Minister Nishida informally appointed to ambassadorship; Yabunaka likely to be successor to Nishida

TOKYO 00007000 004 OF 005

ASAHI (Page 4) (Full)  
December 15, 2006

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs informally decided on Dec. 14 to appoint Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Tsuneo Nishida to an ambassadorial post in January and Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Affairs Mitoji Yabunaka as the replacement of Nishida.

Nishida joined the ministry in 1970. He has been serving in his current post since last August after serving in such posts as Russian Division director, Economic Cooperation Bureau director general, and Foreign Policy Bureau head. He will be replaced after serving only 16 months. Underlying the ministry's decision to withdraw him from his post seems to be the fact that he was at odds with then Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe as he called on the government to take a cautious response to an UN Security Council sanctions resolution against North Korea's July missile test. Following these appointments, the expectation is that Foreign Policy Bureau Director General Masaharu Kono will be picked as Yabunaka's successor; Chikao Kawai, director general of the North American Affairs Bureau, will replace Kono; and Shinichi Nishinomiya, envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to China, will succeed Kawai.

(5) Cooperation between Japan, NATO; Unknown benefits; US, EU have high hopes

YOMIURI (Page 15) (Slightly abridged)  
December 15, 2006

Prime Minister Abe will visit the headquarters of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This is the first visit by a Japanese prime minister. Since NATO is at a major turning point, his visit will likely open up a horizon for a new age for cooperation between Japan and NATO.

The NATO Summit held in Riga, Latvia, on Nov. 28-29 was enveloped by an unusual tension. Members of the military alliance formed in 1948 at the onset of the Cold War discussed how they could cooperate with non-NATO member nations in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Japan and Australia.

Some participants among the 26 member nations took a cautious view, but US President Bush's stance was clear. Terming cooperation with non-allied countries as a global partnership program, he went as far as to say, "NATO will be able to jointly make proposals for joint drills, exercises and operation programs with Japan and Australia in the future."

In the end, Japan, Australia, South Korea and New Zealand were included in the list of possible partners. These are the countries that meet the following conditions: (1) sharing such values as freedom, democracy and respect for human rights with NATO member nations; (2) having cooperative relations with NATO in political and operational terms; and (3) being stable in political terms and having resources in terms of funds and personnel. The NATO Riga Summit, the first held in one of the three Baltic nations, has historic meaning in the sense that it has come up an intention to strengthen cooperation with Asia-Pacific nations as a general consensus of the member nations.

Abe will visit NATO Headquarters following this decision. NATO

members have high expectations for Japan. Martin Erdmann, Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs and Security Policy at the

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NATO Headquarters, expressed his expectations of Abe's visit, "I want to hear the prime minister's view on the future."

NATO has recently developed relations with Japan rapidly. It invited Foreign Minister Aso to NATO Headquarters in Brussels this May. In June, senior officers of the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) took part in a joint drill carried out in the Black Sea as observers. In August, the NATO Defense College in Rome for the first time accepted JSDF officers.

In mid-November, senior defense officials, including uniformed officers, exchanged information and opinions with senior NATO officers. A Japanese government source indicated his perception that time is ripe for strengthening relations with NATO.

However, NATO is wooing Japan because of its own circumstances.

NATO is now fighting a difficult battle with Taliban fighters in southern Afghanistan. The US says that action against terrorism is NATO's future agenda. Britain, Canada and the Netherlands are jointly acting with NATO. France and Germany, which confronted the US over how military power should be used when the Iraq war was started, are negative toward the idea of taking part in combat. With no bright future for reconstruction in sight, the US and Britain sought to reinforce military forces in southern Afghanistan but failed to secure any clear-cut commitment from them.

At first, NATO had expected the SDF to dispatch troops to Afghanistan. Following a series of talks to find out the intention of the other party, NATO has begun to understand the constitutional limitations the SDF have.

As a realistic means for cooperation, a NATO military source said: "The Japanese government-sponsored Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program in Japan was wonderful. We want it to implement a similar program again." They also expect cooperation from Japan on Africa in the future.

What will be the benefit of Japan cooperating with NATO? Some Japanese government officials expect NATO to serve as a geopolitical counterweight to China in East Asia, as Beijing is increasingly strengthening its power. However, since Japan is not a NATO member, it has no obligation for joint defense as stipulated in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, and NATO has ruled out such a possibility.

SCHIEFFER